



# Park and Partners Request Your Input for Elk and Vegetation Management Planning

## Summer 2003

*The National Park Service and partners in adjacent areas will be developing and evaluating alternatives for managing elk and vegetation in and around Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. Our goal is to reduce the impacts of elk on vegetation, reduce conflicts between people and elk, and to restore the natural range of variability in both the elk population and affected plant communities to the extent possible.*

*An environmental impact statement will be prepared during the planning process to evaluate the effects of a range of management alternatives on the natural and human environment.*

*This newsletter is devoted to explaining the upcoming elk and vegetation management plan. It provides background information on elk and vegetation in the park and neighboring areas, and describes actions that might be included in a plan. It also outlines future activities and describes how you can stay involved in and contribute to an effective planning process.*

*An important part of the planning and environmental impact statement process is understanding the interests and priorities of the public. Therefore, we are requesting your input on the issues and concerns that are important to you regarding the management of elk and vegetation. I encourage your participation.*

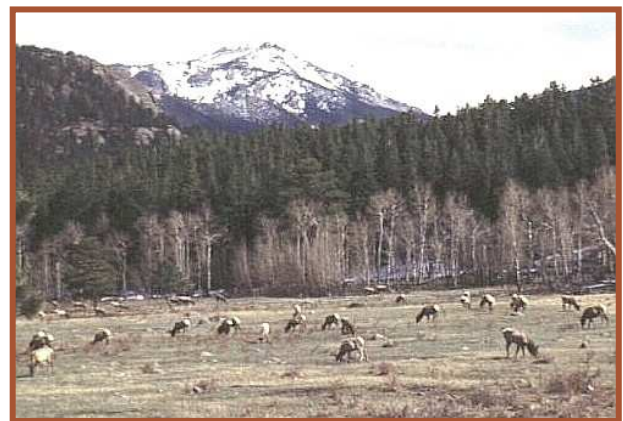
Vaughn L. Baker, Superintendent  
Rocky Mountain National Park

## How Have Elk Been Managed in the Past?

Elk are native to the Rocky Mountain National Park area, and have lived in the vicinity for thousands of years. However, by the 1870s, heavy and unregulated hunting had eliminated elk in the area. Around 1900, wolves, the only significant predator of elk in the area, had also disappeared. Elk were reintroduced to the area in 1913 and 1914, shortly before Rocky Mountain National Park was established in 1915.

In the absence of both significant predation and hunting, the elk population in the park flourished. By the early 1930s, elk numbers had increased to the point that National Park Service (NPS) managers expressed concern about deteriorating vegetation conditions on the elk winter range. Starting in 1944, the elk population using the park was limited primarily by having rangers cull the herd (kill elk by shooting). To a lesser degree, trapping and transplanting also were used to control elk numbers. For the next 25 years, the number of elk using Rocky Mountain National Park was maintained between 350 and 800 animals. In 1969, a natural regulation policy involving no active management within the park was instituted. It was believed that hunting in adjacent areas would control the elk population in and near the park.

Since then, the size of the elk population has more than tripled. Elk population studies conducted in the mid- to late-1990s showed that generally about 1,000 elk wintered in low-elevation areas inside park boundaries on the east side of Rocky Mountain National Park, and another 2,000 elk wintered outside park boundaries in the Town of Estes Park and on adjacent private and U.S. Forest Service lands. Elk generally occupy these winter range areas from October to May. Elk migration studies have shown that the majority of these elk move west to inhabit the high elevations and west side of Rocky Mountain National Park during the summer.



Approximately 3,000 elk overwinter in the lower elevations of Rocky Mountain National Park and adjacent public and private lands.

## What Will an Elk and Vegetation Management Plan Do?

Discussions with agencies that have jurisdiction over wildlife or habitat in the area have identified a number of management objectives for the upcoming plan. Some of these objectives relate to safety, economics, recreational opportunities, and the protection of private property. A key purpose for the NPS is to fulfill the mission of the park as established by legislation on January 26, 1915 and to meet the mandates of the Organic Act, which established the NPS in 1916. Based on these laws, the park's Statement for Management identifies the purpose of the park, which is to preserve the natural conditions and scenic beauties, conserve the natural and historic objects and wildlife, and provide for the freest recreational use consistent with this purpose.

In consideration of this purpose and NPS management policies, important objectives of the plan are to identify and implement measures that will maintain, restore, and protect the inherent integrity of natural resources by restoring the natural range of variability in both the elk population and affected plant communities to the extent possible.

Activities to support the plan have been underway since 1994, when a large-scale research project was started. The results of this and other research are providing a sound, scientific basis for decision-making on how best to manage the area's elk and vegetation.



**Heavily browsed willow shrubs in Horseshoe Park provide poor habitat for species such as songbirds, butterflies, and beaver.**

## Why Consider Managing Elk and Vegetation Together?

Elk are herbivores, meaning they feed on plant material. Their forage includes grasses; non-woody, low-growing plants called forbs; and "browse," which includes the tender shoots, twigs, and leaves of shrubs and trees. Willow and aspen are important sources of browse.

The health and welfare of the park's elk and the plant communities are closely linked. Recent research indicates that elk numbers, concentrations, and migration patterns are outside of the range of variation that would be expected under natural conditions. This is adversely affecting several plant communities within the elk winter range. By late winter in upland shrub communities, the grass is grazed nearly to the ground and there are many bare spots. As illustrated in the photos, willow shrubs have been browsed back to indigestible old branches, aspen trees have been stripped of bark as high as the elk can reach, and young shoots are unable to grow due to heavy elk browsing.



**The browse line is clearly visible on these Moraine Park aspen. Regeneration of declining aspen stands is prevented by continual browsing of emerging root suckers.**

Vegetation removal by elk has many effects in Rocky Mountain National Park and surrounding areas. For example:

- It prevents the regeneration of willow and aspen stands. As old plants die, areas are converted to meadows or have suppressed shrub growth. This reduces habitat for many other animals, such as wetland-associated songbirds and butterflies.
- Studies suggest that current levels of elk browsing result in a lack of willow needed to support beaver populations in many areas on the elk winter range. Without beaver dams, the water tables in the park's stream valleys have dropped, adversely affecting the ability of willow to regenerate in the valleys.
- Property damage and human safety concerns in Estes Park have increased as elk increasingly use parks, golf courses, and yards in close proximity to people.

## What Are the Alternatives for Managing Elk and Vegetation?

One of the alternatives that will be included in the draft plan is an alternative that would continue no active management of elk and vegetation in the park into the future, and it will be evaluated at the same level of detail as the action alternatives. The planning team has not yet defined the action alternatives for elk and vegetation management. One of the purposes of the public participation process, including this newsletter, is to help us develop these alternatives. Each action alternative will probably use multiple management tools, and each will work toward meeting the same set of objectives. However, they will emphasize different approaches and may differ in how quickly they achieve the target conditions.

Broad categories of management actions that could be incorporated in plan alternatives are listed below. Some of these tools may be unpopular to some people. However, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires that a full range of alternatives be considered for actions taken by federal agencies. State agencies such as the Colorado Division of Wildlife are not bound by NEPA guidelines for management activities.

- Install fencing or other barriers to prevent or deter elk from using selected areas.
- Use herding or hazing to keep elk in or away from specified areas. Landowner permission would be required outside the park.
- Use hunting outside of Rocky Mountain National Park and/or within the park (would require Congressional approval) to reduce elk numbers or densities.
- Use culling by NPS personnel inside the park and/or by Colorado Division of Wildlife personnel outside the park to reduce elk numbers or densities.
- Use fertility control methods (contraceptives) to prevent the birth of additional elk.
- Reintroduce wolves to the Rocky Mountain National Park ecosystem. At this time the Colorado Wildlife Commission opposes reintroduction of wolves in the state of Colorado. Reintroduction of wolves outside the park would require approval by the state legislature and a review of commission policy.
- Use vegetation and habitat management techniques such as prescribed burns, forest thinning, or planting willows to improve habitat both in current winter range and in areas that are not presently used by elk.
- Reintroduce beavers or install dams that simulate beaver dams to elevate water tables and promote willow growth in areas where water tables have declined.
- Use zoning and the purchase of private lands to help manage elk and vegetation outside of the park.

The planning team welcomes your suggestions regarding additional management approaches for elk and vegetation in and around Rocky Mountain National Park, and issues or concerns that should be considered. Please focus on identifying approaches that could work, or issues that should be addressed, rather than describing why one or more of the tools identified above would not be acceptable.

## Who Is Preparing the Plan?

Rocky Mountain National Park recognizes that elk move freely across park boundaries and the local elk population does not exclusively inhabit the park. Because of the migratory nature of the elk population, a regional approach is essential to develop a meaningful, long-term plan. Therefore, the NPS is committed to working in partnership with nearby land managers and other federal, state, and local agencies to effectively manage elk and vegetation in the vicinity of the park.

The interagency planning team that will prepare the elk and vegetation management plan includes three levels of participation.

- The NPS is the **lead agency**, and is responsible for all aspects of developing the plan and environmental impact statement (EIS), including selection of a preferred alternative and preparing a record of decision.
- Cooperating agencies on the **core planning team** will participate in all aspects of developing the plan and EIS. Agencies on this team include the Town of Estes Park and the Estes Valley Recreation and Parks District.
- Cooperating agencies on the **extended planning team** have agreed to provide expertise and data on pertinent topics and to review appropriate portions of the plan and EIS. Agencies on this team include the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Grand County, Larimer County, Town of Grand Lake, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, and U.S. Forest Service.



Information from scientific studies, including intensive research conducted in the area in recent years, will provide a sound, scientific basis for decision-making.



This statue of “Samson,” killed by a poacher in 1995, is emblematic of the importance of the elk herd to the Town of Estes Park.

## But I Like Seeing Elk When I Visit Rocky Mountain National Park.

The EIS is being prepared to determine the effects of management approaches on resources and values such as visitor experience. Objectives of the plan include maintaining a wild and free-roaming elk population and providing for recreational opportunities such as elk viewing. The EIS will evaluate whether or not reduced numbers of elk would be expected to translate to reduced elk viewing opportunities in the park, reduced numbers of visitors, or reduced expenditures in Estes Park. We recognize that there are many natural, social, cultural, and economic values that are associated with implementing an elk and vegetation management plan for Rocky Mountain National Park and surrounding areas. That is why we are asking for your input in identifying the issues and concerns that should be addressed, and actions that you would like to see considered.

Based on the issues that you and others identify, the EIS process will evaluate the effects of each of the elk and vegetation management alternatives on natural, social, cultural, and economic values. This will include examining the implications of elk management on economics and lifestyle in Estes Park and other communities, and on visitor experiences, such as observing the autumn elk rutting displays.

The EIS will provide decision-makers and stakeholders, including you, with a clear understanding of the effects that would result from implementing each of the management alternatives. While some effects could be mitigated, stakeholders must recognize that any plan will adversely affect some values and have positive effects on other values. The objective of this entire planning and public participation process is to develop a final plan that will maximize benefits and minimize disadvantages.

### What about Chronic Wasting Disease?

Chronic wasting disease is a fatal brain disease found in deer and elk. Some elk in the park and in adjacent areas east of the park are known to have chronic wasting disease. The elk and vegetation management plan will not specifically evaluate alternatives for managing chronic wasting disease. However, the strategies and objectives of the plan will be consistent with chronic wasting disease management both inside and outside of the park. A separate but related project will consider options for determining the prevalence of chronic wasting disease in elk in Rocky Mountain National Park. The Colorado Division of Wildlife is managing chronic wasting disease and surveying its prevalence in elk outside the park. Public scoping meetings that are held for the elk and vegetation management plan will also provide information and seek input on chronic wasting disease prevalence determination. However, a separate discussion document will be prepared. We welcome your involvement in discussing options for determining the prevalence of chronic wasting disease in elk. We have included a check-box on the accompanying response form where you can indicate your desire to be included on the park's chronic wasting disease mailing list. You can also get on the park's chronic wasting disease mailing list by signing up at one of the scoping meetings.

### Where in the Planning Process Are We?

The table below briefly summarizes the process for preparing the elk and vegetation management plan and your opportunities to participate. As you can see, we are just starting the planning process.

You are invited to attend one of the public scoping meetings that will be held in September. If you do not attend a meeting, but want to contribute to scoping, you can send us written comments by October 10, 2003. You can also check for information and provide comments on our web site at [www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation](http://www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation).

Please be aware that there may be times when the website is unavailable and electronic comment submittal will not be possible. Comments can still be submitted by the various other methods identified in this newsletter.

|                                | Planning Activity   | Public Involvement Opportunity  |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| WE ARE HERE                    | Initiate project and conduct scoping on issues and concerns.          | Read this newsletter and join the mailing list.<br>Attend public meetings in September 2003.<br>Provide comments on the enclosed response form, via letter or our website, or at a public meeting.        |
| FALL AND WINTER<br>2003 / 2004 | Develop draft alternatives and conduct scoping on those alternatives. | Read the alternatives newsletter that will be sent to all on the mailing list.<br>Obtain important background information on the web site.<br>Attend public meetings in winter 2003.<br>Provide comments. |
| FALL OR WINTER<br>2004 / 2005  | Publish the draft elk and vegetation management plan and EIS.         | Become familiar with the draft plan by attending public meetings or by reading the draft plan or its summary.<br>Provide oral or written comments at meetings, or comment via letter or our website.      |
| FALL 2005                      | Finalize plan and EIS.  |   |

Draft alternatives will be developed late this year and will address the issues that were identified during scoping. If you are on our mailing list, you will receive a newsletter that describes the draft alternatives and asks for your input on those alternatives and their potential effects. You will also be able to attend public workshops where you can discuss the draft alternatives with the planning team and provide input. After the alternatives are defined, we will prepare the draft elk and vegetation management plan and EIS.

You will receive another newsletter toward the end of the evaluation process. It will discuss the progress to date, and will identify when the draft elk and vegetation management plan and EIS will be available for public review. It also will present options on how to review the document, such as in print form, on the internet, on a compact disc, or as a summary.

We anticipate release of the draft plan and EIS in the fall or winter of 2004/2005. At that point, you will be invited to attend public meetings during which the draft plan will be summarized and your oral or written comments will be solicited. You will also be able to comment on the draft plan by letter or electronically via the internet.

We will prepare responses to all substantive comments received regarding the draft plan, and will revise the plan as needed to address the substantive comments. The final plan and record of decision will be published, and implementation of the plan will proceed.

## How Can I Participate or Stay Informed?

If you are already on our mailing list you do not need to do anything to maintain your active status – you will receive all project updates. However, we encourage you to contribute to scoping so that we can obtain a full understanding of concerns and issues that would affect planning. We need to receive your comments on or before October 10, 2003.



We hope you will be able to share your ideas with us at one of the five scoping meetings that will be held in the region. The locations, dates, and times for the meetings are listed below.

If you want to participate in scoping and/or join our mailing list, you can let us know by any one of several methods.

- You can attend a scoping meeting, where you can learn more about the project and provide us with oral or written comments. We are planning five scoping meetings throughout the region. See the table below for public meeting locations, dates, and times.
- You can use the form that is included in this newsletter to join the mailing list, identify the issues or concerns that you think should be addressed, and/or identify management approaches that you would like to see considered.
- You can send us a letter at: Superintendent, Rocky Mountain National Park, Attn: Elk and Vegetation Management Plan, Estes Park, Colorado 80517.
- You can submit comments via our website at [www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation](http://www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation). Please be aware that there may be times when the website is unavailable and electronic comment submittal will not be possible. Comments can still be submitted by the various other methods identified in this newsletter.

- You can hand-deliver written comments during normal operating hours to the drop-boxes that will be located at the Alpine, Beaver Meadows, Fall River, Lily Lake, and Kawuneeche Visitor Centers, the Moraine Park Museum, and the Estes Park public library.

Regardless of how you comment, please include your name and mailing address.

|  <b>SCOPING MEETINGS</b> |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| TOWN  | WHERE   | WHEN  |
| Loveland  | Loveland High School<br>920 W 29 <sup>th</sup> Street   | Tuesday, September 23<br>6:30pm to 9:30pm   |
| Grand Lake  | Grand Lake Town Hall<br>1026 Park Avenue                | Wednesday, September 24<br>6:30pm to 9:30pm |
| Boulder   | Millenium Harvest Hotel<br>1345 28 <sup>th</sup> Street | Thursday, September 25<br>6:30pm to 9:30pm  |
| Estes Park  | Inn at Estes Park<br>1701 N Lake Ave/Hwy 34             | Saturday, September 27<br>11:00am to 4:00pm |
| Estes Park  | Holiday Inn<br>101 S St. Vrain Avenue                   | Tuesday, September 30<br>6:30pm to 9:30pm   |

Throughout this project, it will be our practice to make comments, including names and home addresses of respondents, available for public review. Individual respondents may request that we withhold their home address from the record, which we will honor to the extent allowable by law. There also may be circumstances in which we would withhold from the record a respondent's identity, as allowable by law. If you wish us to withhold your name and/or address, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comment. We will make all submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, available for public inspection in their entirety.

Additional copies of this newsletter may be obtained at the Alpine, Beaver Meadows, Fall River, Lily Lake, and Kawuneeche Visitor Centers, the Moraine Park Museum, the Estes Park public library, or an electronic copy can be downloaded from the project website. For further information, please contact the park information office:

Phone: 970-586-1206

Rocky Mountain National Park

Attn: Elk and Vegetation Management Plan

Estes Park, Colorado 80517

[www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation](http://www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation)





## Public Comment Form for Elk and Vegetation Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

### ISSUES

The Summer 2003 newsletter from Rocky Mountain National Park provides background information regarding the management of elk and vegetation in and around the park. What are the issues or concerns about elk and vegetation management that you think should be considered? (Use additional pages, if needed.)

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### MANAGEMENT TOOLS

We will evaluate an alternative to continue no active management of elk or vegetation (the no action alternative) and several alternatives that represent a change from current management. Tell us what management tools you would like to see considered in an elk and vegetation management plan to reduce the impacts of elk on vegetation, reduce conflicts between people and elk, and restore the natural range of variability in both the elk population and affected plant communities to the extent possible. (Use additional pages, if needed.)

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You can submit comments by several methods. **Comments must be received by October 10, 2003.**

- You can fold and return this form with your comments.
- You can send a letter to: Superintendent, Rocky Mountain National Park, Attn: Elk and Vegetation Management Plan, Estes Park, Colorado 80517
- You can provide us with oral or written comments at one of the scoping meetings to be held in September 2003. Dates, locations, and times are listed in the Summer 2003 newsletter and are available at our website [www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation](http://www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation).
- You can submit comments via our website at [www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation](http://www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation).
- You can hand-deliver written comments to the drop boxes at any of the park's visitor centers, the Moraine Park Museum, or the Estes Park public library.

Check below as applicable:

- ☐ Please add me to the elk and vegetation management plan mailing list.
- ☐ Please add me to the mailing list for the project to determine the prevalence of chronic wasting disease in elk in the park.
- ☐ Please remove me from the mailing lists for these projects.

Please provide your name and mailing address:

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And,

- ☐ I prefer to receive electronic documents via e-mail (address \_\_\_\_\_).
- ☐ I will download my own copy of the newsletters/documents from the NPS web site.
- ☐ I will go to park headquarters or the library and read the copy on file there.
- ☐ I would like to receive printed versions of newsletters/documents.



**National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior**

**Rocky Mountain National Park  
Estes Park, Colorado 80517**

Place  
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**Superintendent  
Attn: Elk and Vegetation Management Plan  
Rocky Mountain National Park  
Estes Park, Colorado 80517**

Please fold here and close with tape or staple

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE**

### **Your Input is Requested on Options for Determining Chronic Wasting Disease Prevalence**

#### **What is Chronic Wasting Disease?**

Chronic wasting disease is a fatal disease in deer and elk. Chronic wasting disease is a member of the transmissible spongiform encephalopathy family of diseases. Other diseases in this family include Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (mad cow disease) in cattle, scrapie in sheep and goats, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease in humans. These diseases are typified by spongiform change (development of holes) in the brain. Current research indicates that chronic wasting disease does not affect humans or livestock through natural transmission.

#### **Where is Chronic Wasting Disease Present?**

The origin of chronic wasting disease is unknown. The core area of infection includes northeastern and north central Colorado (including the eastern side of Rocky Mountain National Park), western Nebraska, and southeastern Wyoming. In Rocky Mountain National Park a total of sixteen cases of chronic wasting disease have been confirmed, twelve in elk and four in mule deer. Of these sixteen cases the first documented elk with chronic wasting disease was in 1981 and all documented cases in mule deer were in 2001.

#### **Why Do We Need to Know the Prevalence Rate of Chronic Wasting Disease in Elk?**

Rocky Mountain National Park is looking at ways to address chronic wasting disease. Currently we are gathering information to help evaluate various options. One key piece of information needed to evaluate options is current rates of infection (prevalence rates) for deer and elk. For deer a live test for chronic wasting disease is available. This allows our staff to estimate chronic wasting disease prevalence in mule deer on Rocky Mountain National Park lands. For elk no live test is currently available.

Elk population studies have shown that the majority of elk in the area inhabit the high elevations and west side of Rocky Mountain National Park during the summer. In the fall these elk move east to lower elevation winter range areas that are generally used between October and May. Studies conducted in the mid to late 1990s indicated that about 1,000 elk wintered in areas inside Rocky Mountain National Park and another 2,000 elk wintered outside park boundaries in the Town of Estes Park and on adjacent private and U. S. Forest Service Lands. Information on the prevalence of chronic wasting disease in elk that inhabit the park for all or part of the year will be important to developing an Elk and Vegetation Management Plan.

#### **What Are the Options for Determining the Prevalence Rate of Chronic Wasting Disease in Elk?**

Several options are available utilizing different approaches that would have varying levels of accuracy for determining the prevalence rate of chronic wasting disease in elk that inhabit Rocky Mountain National Park. Three ways have been identified to determine the chronic wasting disease prevalence rate in elk but others may be presented and considered as part of the public involvement process.

Current methods include:

- Extrapolate elk chronic wasting disease prevalence in Rocky Mountain National Park by utilizing hunter harvest prevalence estimates in game management units on adjacent lands.
- Extrapolate prevalence from testing of elk carcasses found within Rocky Mountain National Park (general surveillance).
- Lethal random sampling inside Rocky Mountain National Park of elk that use the park for some or all of the year.

**Who Is Preparing the Strategy?**

Rocky Mountain National Park will be the lead agency for the strategy. We are consulting with other agencies and adjacent landowners that would be affected by decisions regarding chronic wasting disease.

**How Can I Participate or Stay Informed?**

You can indicate your desire to be included on Rocky Mountain National Park's chronic wasting disease mailing list by marking the check-box on the accompanying response form in the newsletter. You can also sign up for the mailing list at one of the scoping meetings. Comments can be submitted in three ways. Comments can be mailed on the response form in the newsletter. Public scoping meetings that are held for the Elk and Vegetation Management Plan will also provide information and seek input on chronic wasting disease prevalence determination. We invite your participation and comments at those upcoming scoping meetings that are listed in the newsletter. Written comments can also be sent directly to the park.

Please send comments to the following address.

ATTN: CWD Elk Prevalence Comments  
Superintendent's Office  
Rocky Mountain National Park  
Estes Park, Colorado 80517

All comments should be postmarked by October 31, 2003.

For more information please contact:  
Rocky Mountain National Park Information Office  
Phone: 970-586-1206





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**Visit our website at:**

[www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation](http://www.nps.gov/romo/planning/elkvegetation)

The National Park Service cares for  
the special places saved by the American people  
so that all may experience our heritage.

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